



# Material culture in the Old Testament: Conflict and propaganda with Missionary Christianity



## Authors:

Ucheawaji G. Josiah<sup>1,2,3</sup>   
 Blessing Jeffrey-  
 Ebhomenmen<sup>1,3</sup> 

## Affiliations:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Religious Studies, Faculty of Arts, Adeleke University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>Department and Faculty of Religion and Art, University of Religions and Denominations, Pardisan Qom, Iran

<sup>3</sup>Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, School of Humanities, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

Ucheawaji Josiah,  
 josiah.ucheawaji@adelekeuniversity.edu.ng

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Cultural materiality as evident in the Old Testament (OT) was borne out of personal and corporate experiences of ancient Israelites with YHWH (Ex 16:32–34; 25–36; Nm 16–17, Jos 3–4). At the dawn of Christian Missions, certain indigenous religious objects became 'idolatrous', but across the Atlantic Ocean, they were works of art kept in museums and art galleries. This negatively impacted biblical reception by the locals. This work investigates select OT icons and wades into their ontological and existential significance in relation to the conflict and propaganda of Missionary Christianity towards indigenous icons. The narrative criticism and the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) including Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were engaged in the study while the Symbolic Interactionism was the theoretical framework. The objects preserved by ancient Israel were to serve as relics for future generations who were to have an existential knowledge of YHWH's dealings with their forebears. Western missionaries claimed to have transmitted biblical messages to Africa, yet their approach led to conflicts in biblical reception by the indigenous people who struggled between being detached from their existential realities, and accepting the gospel with its Eurocentric biases. The Western missionaries' inability to transmit the biblical understanding of cultural materiality in their dealings with Africans invites suspicion in the missionaries' efforts with a pretentious display of ignorance of the ontological significance of indigenous materiality.

**Contribution:** This article offers insight into the conflict and propaganda inherent in the Western missionaries' approach in transmitting biblical messages of cultural materiality, and challenges of biblical reception among indigenous people in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Old Testament icons; African indigenous materiality; missionary Christianity; relic; biblical transmission; biblical reception.

## Introduction

The Old and New Testaments are replete with material culture which had played prominent roles as relics and also as representations of YHWH's dealings with ancient Israel. This idea is also evident in the many ways Africans preserve their unique histories. Generally speaking, icons are not just artefacts because they also tell the history of a people and their dealings with their God(s), fellow people, and how they interpret the world around them. These relics are kept for posterity, and the oral traditions accompanying them are usually learned and transmitted to the younger generation through folklore, storytelling and festivals, mostly to commemorate the events leading to certain heroic achievements. When these events are not adequately preserved or are discarded by civilisation, unusual interpretations are ascribed to them. There have been occasions where even certain indigenous objects were misinterpreted.

In the book titled *Juju vs Christianity: An African Dilemma* by Gary S. Maxey and Umar H.D. Danfulani (2019), the 'cross' symbol was used to represent Christianity while the image of the renowned Queen Idia of Benin cosmology, in Nigeria, was used as a portrayal of Juju. This interpretation appears inaccurate and misleading, and reflects a sense of a conflict among African receptors of 'Western' Christianity probably because of a historical obliviousness. In essence, the misrepresented relic is an iconic depiction of Queen Idia of the legendary ancient Benin kingdom, whose relic is an iconic depiction of her great feat.

The Bible, like the famous depiction of Queen Idia, features remarkable symbols whose significance cannot be over emphasised. Some of the symbols have been identified. Here, few are highlighted

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namely: the Brazen Serpent, the Ark of the Covenant, Aaron's Rod that Buds, and the Golden Pot of Manna from the wilderness experience, as well as their relation to ancient Near Eastern culture and their significance. The arrival of Christian Missions and the missionary approach of Western missionaries appeared to have negatively impacted biblical reception by the Nigerian locals whose existence was defined by the missionaries' limited understanding, and their assigned meaning to the local's cultural materiality. In fact, Maxey and Danfulani (2019:51) admitted that the 'early missionaries did not come to sub-Saharan Africa with a balanced biblical worldview'. Therefore, this work investigates selected Old Testament (OT) icons with the aim of wading into their ontological and existential significance in relation to the conflict and propaganda of Missionary Christianity towards indigenous materiality in parts of Nigeria. This goal is achieved through narrative criticism, Focus Group Discussion (FGD), and the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA combines three broad philosophical perspectives: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography where the lived-experiences of individuals are characterised and the meaning and significance of data collected are interpreted within the individual's context. The study also utilises Symbolic Interactionism as the theoretical framework. According to Herbert Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism is a sociological theory that develops from practical considerations and alludes to particular effects of communication and interaction on people with the ability to make images for deduction and correspondence with others. Symbolic interaction was credited to George Herbert Mead and Charles Horton Cooley.

Nevertheless, sociologists regard Mead as the one 'true founder' of the symbolic interactionism tradition because of his influence (Blumer 1969). For Blumer, symbolic interactionism rests on the following tenets: (1) that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them; (2) that the meaning of such things derives from the social interaction one has with their fellows; and (3) that such meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process. This theory addresses the experience of Africans and particularly the indigenous people in parts of Nigeria which constitute the scope of this study. The interaction especially with reality among the indigenous people in parts of Nigeria over a long period of time produced certain symbols which had meaning within the context of their existence. This meaning had formed their interpretive process regarding the cosmos and realities. Such contextualisation of meaning among the indigenous people in parts of Nigeria was what Western missionaries failed to recognise and thus misinterpreted the symbols borne out of interaction with the supernatural and suprasensible and generated by the indigenous people (Blumer 1969). This theoretical framework thus becomes a suitable bedrock for the study of interaction, symbols, and meaning derived by the indigenous people as well as the misinterpretation engendered by Western missions.

## Cultural materiality in the Old Testament

### The Brazen Serpent (Nm 21:4–9)

The book of Numbers 21:4–9 gives a narration of how YHWH responded to the Israelites' rebellion in the wilderness. This episode describes how the disciplinary agency – fiery serpents – sent by YHWH into the camp destroyed many of the Israelites. Nevertheless, at the people's confession, YHWH provided an antidote – a bronze-like serpent on a pole. But why YHWH's choice of a serpent for this image? It has been noted that in the snake, the venom and the antivenom coexist. Bollhagen (1983) believes that:

... the snake has unique qualities that make it stand out among non-human creatures of God ... That the snake is both a symbol of Christ and Satan. As recorded in numbers 21, until the bronze snake was looked upon by the victims, salvation was literally far from them. This snake is the perfect symbol of Christ who will be the Saviour of the world only on the grounds of trust and sincere desire from the victims of sins. (p. 7)

The words of Bollhagen show an existential significance of the bronze serpent in the life of Israelites of the exodus. Interestingly, the bronze serpent was not mentioned again in the Old Testament after the wilderness experience until nearly 500 years later, during the reign of Hezekiah. It was then, known as *Nehushtan* which was demolished by king Hezekiah of Judah as part of his reform (2 Ki 18:4). It took considerable courage for king Hezekiah to demolish such a relic. The reason given for the destruction of such an object was simply that 'it became a trap for God's people'. Such demolishing of the *Nehushtan* in Hezekiah's days did not eradicate the people's understanding of the central place of the object in their existence. In trying to explain the significance of the serpent in ancient Near East, Bollhagen (1983) further asserts that:

Of all the creatures in the animal kingdom none has captured the religious imagination of man as thoroughly as the serpent. The serpent symbol, in all its natural and mythical varieties, attained cultic significance in virtually every corner of the world. Moving eastward from the Ancient Near East, the serpent symbol can be traced through Elam and Arabia into India; in a westerly direction it stretched through Anatolia into Greece and Rome, thus gaining a foothold in western civilization. The serpent emblem made its way to various regions of Africa via Egypt. In terms of chronology, serpent symbolism persisted beyond the worship of the deity *Nehushtan*, even down to the Gnostic Ophite sect, and it persists to the current day in the shape of snake handlers' cults in the United States. (p. 1)

From the above text, it has been established that serpent symbols were not only attributed to Israel but also to neighbouring and faraway countries. Here the author establishes the fact that even the Western world with its acceptance of Christianity also believes in symbols of the serpent. This point raises a concern as to whether Western missionaries were ignorant of the importation of certain symbols into Christianity. Granted that they were aware of these realities, what could have motivated their perception

on African cultural materiality? Was that a display of propaganda? As it relates to the serpent symbol, it is worthy of note that the serpent has a mysterious mode of locomotion as recorded in Proverbs 30:19; some have the ability to resemble or adapt to their environment. Again, Bollhagen (1983) further describes the snake as being characterised by: its silence; its ability to remain perpetually watchful even during periods of sleep; its strength to hold the head aloft for long periods of time; its habit of frequenting ruins, graves and other uninhabited areas; its ability to go long periods of time without eating; its piercing gaze; its tongue flicking; and 'death and resurrection' by sloughing off its skin, all testify to the makeup of the serpent. In fact, serpents were also connected with supernatural deliverance or salvation. In Numbers 21, the brazen snake is used to free the children of Israel from the fiery serpents, and a Jewish apocryphal refers to it as a symbol of deliverance (Awabdy 2022; Neal Rappleye 2022).

In Egypt, Canaan and ancient Near East, serpent was both seen as a friendly and protective emblem that accounts for their veneration, and was also considered dangerous, and a symbol of evil like *Apep* of Egypt, Serpent dragon, Rahab, or the Canaanite Lotan. Accordingly, Bollhagen (1983) holds that:

If the serpent was at once a symbol of destruction and protection, of life and death, it could also be said to possess the power to distinguish between the two, that is, wisdom. Positively, the serpent was considered to know the answer to many mysteries; on the negative side, it was subtle enough to stage a surprise attack on its victims. The possibly related verb *nahash* (Gn 30:27, Lv 19:26, Nm 23:23) means to practice divination. If so, by charming the snake the enchanter showed his own wisdom in that he was able to outwit the snake. One cannot help but think here of how wisdom is personified in the Book of Proverbs (1:20). (p. 11)

Apart from the above qualities, just as the fiery snake became a symbol of healing, the ancient Near East also sees the snake as a symbol of healing. 'The serpent is also a symbol of healing. The primary witness to this is the caduceus, which became the staff of Aesculapius, the Greek God of healing and medicine' (Bollagen 1983:7).

### The Ark of the Covenant (Ex 25:10–22, 31)

In the book of Exodus 31, Moses instructed Bezalel and Aholiab to construct the Ark. The Ark of the Covenant happened to be the most sacred relic in Old Testament because of its significance to the ancient Israelites. It was an iconographic object that established the presence of God and the relevance of the perpetuity of the covenant between God and his chosen people, Israel. The Ark of the Covenant was described as a wooden casket coated in pure gold with an artistically crafted lid known as the mercy seat. The Ark, according to the Book of Exodus, held the two stone tablets containing the 10 Commandments. It also held Aaron's rod and a container of manna, according to the New Testament Book of Hebrews (Ackerman 2000:102). It is so sacred that no

one except the priest was to handle it. Biblical account has it that Uzzah who tried to hold the ark from falling was instantly struck dead (2 Sm 6:1–11) and the Philistines who assumed they captured it as if it were the God of the Israelites returned it with a lot of sacrifice in order to avert the ills brought upon them by the presence of the Ark (1 Sm 4:3–11). It was often mistaken by neighbouring countries to be the God of the Israelites. When Solomon built the temple of the Lord, the most holy place was given the Ark of the Covenant (1 Ki 6:9).

The memorial Ark of Covenant was a sacred emblem of the presence of Yahweh among his people. On several occasions during the Exodus journey, the Ark of the Covenant led the way as recorded in Joshua Chapter 3. The people were only to move on the ground that God was with them and was ready to go with them. The ark became a memorial of God's dealings and presence among the ancient Israelites.

### Aaron's rod that budded (Nm 17)

The rod of Aaron that budded was a significant rod as recorded in the book of Numbers 17. Prior to the event of God speaking to Moses on getting a rod from each family, chapter 16 of Numbers recoded the story of Korah from the lineage of Levi and his cohort Dathan and Abiram who spoke against Moses and Aaron, for he desired the priestly office. This murmur led to the death of Korah, Dathan and Abiram along with their families as a result of an earthquake (Nm 16:31–34) while those two hundred and fifty men who burnt incense were consumed by fire. Eleazer was instructed by God to take their censer and beat it to a plate as a memorial cover for the altar so no one except those of Aaron's decent should offer offerings to the Lord (Nm 16:35–40). Fourteen thousand seven hundred further died as they rebelled.

The above situation led to the command in chapter 17 that every family should keep their rod with their names inscribed on it aside and verse 5 says that the rod of the man whom I choose will blossom. Moses kept Aaron's rod that budded in the tabernacle for a witness, according to the command of God (Nm 17:8–10). At this point of preservation of the rod, it became a heritage of Israel, and a remembrance of the Exodus 7–12 experience where Moses's rod played a vital role in exhibiting YHWH's authority. In the account, a succession of plagues hit Egypt during the period following Pharaoh's refusal to allow Moses' request to let the people of Israel depart from Egypt to Canaan. In multiple competitions with Pharaoh's wise men, Aaron demonstrated Moses' and his own authority. As Aaron threw down his staff, it morphed into a serpent (Ex 7:10), eating all the Egyptian snake-rods. The waters of the Nile turned to blood as Aaron smote it with his rod (Ex 7:20). The plague of frogs began when Aaron stretched his rod over the rivers (Ex 8:6), and the epidemic of

gnats followed. A rod is a symbol of authority in both the ancient and modern worlds.

The rod or staff was a symbol of authority in the ancient Near East. They were held by kings, leaders and even gods. Rabbinic and post-rabbinic Judaism continued to be fascinated with these rods, and have constructed narrative and mythic complexes around them. Aaron's rod was later placed in the Ark of the Covenant, firstly, to prove to the Israelites that Aaron's family had been permanently chosen to be the priest. Secondly, the emblem signified a shepherd's concern and care for his sheep. The rod represented authority, power, discipline and the defence of the sheep as opined by Jack Albright (2023). The rod was to constantly show them that God was always with them in their affairs and ready to guide them through the leadership of Aaron in matters of salvation (Ps 23:4). The priestly role was not only limited to a mediator and solicitor, but also the prototype of Jesus the High Priest (Heb 9, 10). The sacred work was to be done with great care as Yahweh was the God of Order. God was the shepherd of the Israelite while Aaron was to be under the shepherd of God's people (as under shepherd, Aaron was to work under the divine dictate of God). The budded rod was to be kept in the tabernacle as a perpetual symbol of God's will and choice of leadership. The rod's ability to not only bud, but yield almond and blossom shows how complete and fruitful Aaron's ministry was to God (Nm 17:9–11) (Albright 2023).

### The River Jordan memorial stones (Jos 4:6–7)

The River Jordan memorial stones commemorate the deliverance and wonders of God on the occasion of crossing Jordan to the Promise Land. The journey through the wilderness had not been without huddles as they finally were close and could see the promised land from a distance. Then came the instruction that as soon as they see the Ark of the Covenant which symbolised the presence of Yahweh moving, they should follow. This movement probably required a great level of courage as they were to pass through the river of Jordan, as Joshua 3:15 alludes to the overflowing of the Jordan River which made it dangerous to cross over. Crossing the Jordan is a watershed moment on the path to freedom. The Jordan River symbolises liberation from tyranny, breakthrough and deliverance as they were to pass the only river that is between them and their promised land. Joshua thus admonished them that:

... it shall come to pass, as soon as the soles of the feet of the priests who bear the ark of the lord, the Lord of all earth, shall rest of the Jordan shall be cut off, the waters that come down from upstream, and they shall stand as heap'. Then the priest who bore the Ark of the covenant of the Lord stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel cross over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan (Jos 17:13).

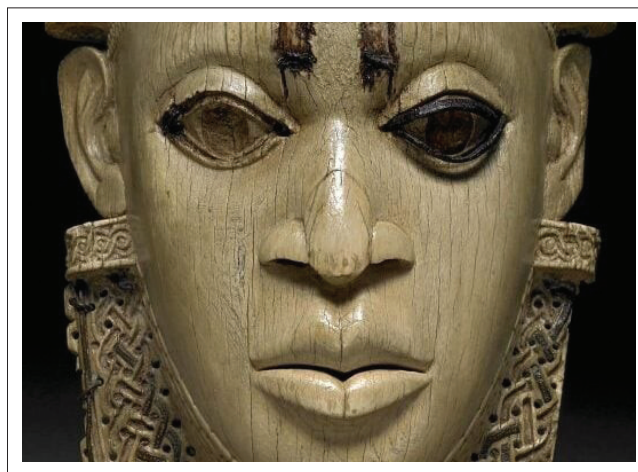
This miracle experienced at the Jordan cannot be forgotten in a haste. In the following chapter, Joshua instructed 12 men from the 12 tribes of Israel to pick up 12 stones from the midst

of the Jordan where the priests were standing. This was to serve as a memorial of how God miraculously created a way through the River Jordan. From a personal analysis of Joshua 3:21–24, God establishes a process of preservation. This process is seen in God's concern in a case where in future the younger generations of Israel would ask, 'What do these stones mean?' The response should be: 'tell them that the flow of the Jordan was shut off before the ark of the LORD's covenant'. Tell them that 'Israel crossed over this Jordan on dry land'. And with this, allusion was made to what God had previously done for the Israelites at the start of their journey from Egypt, by parting the Red Sea, and now the drying of the Jordan River was a symbol of God's assurance of his presence with them, as well as a symbol of total victory, love and assistance. Yahweh cannot let this event pass without proper record-keeping and documentation, hence the memorial stones. Unlike the crossing of the Red Sea, the stones in the river Jordan will serve more as a memorial because it was the boundary of the promised land that has long been anticipated. God knew that generations to come would be curious about the stones, and every moment should be seized to tell the people about the majesty of Yahweh. Just as each biblical icon tells stories about the Israelites, so do African sculptures or icons tell their unique stories.

## Select indigenous materiality in Nigeria

### The Queen Idia's Icon of Benin Kingdom, Nigeria

A memorial head represents Queen Idia, the mother of Oba Esigie (see Figure 1). She lived between 1504 and 1550. She was the first mother of a Benin King to be invested with the title of *Iye-Oba* (Mother of the Oba). Benin oral tradition records that the title was introduced after her demise by her son, Oba Esigie. This title was to honour her in recognition of her incessant spiritual help in averting serious threats to his rule and the integrity of his kingdom. It is said that she actually participated physically in some of the wars to expand and defend the territorial integrity of her son's kingdom. Oba Esigie is also credited with the introduction of



Source: Singer, J.W., 2024, *Masterpiece story: Queen Mother Idia of Benin*, viewed 21 May 2023, from <https://www.dailyartmagazine.com/queen-mother-idia-of-benin>

FIGURE 1: The Queen Idia's Icon of Benin.

the still-extant practice of placing brass heads of Benin Queen Mothers on their commemorative altars (Ebeigbe 2013). The significance of these icons as portraits is that they allude to a specific person, are personally referential and iconic, and serve to immortalise Queen Idia's legacy in her culture (Ebeigbe 2013). In the same vein, Aneni (2016) corroborated the queen Idia's history noting that:

She lived between the late 15th and early 16th century in Benin, southwest, Nigeria. She was an energetic, formidable, strategic and military warrior at the time. She fought before and during the reign of Oba Esigie her son. At the end of the 15th century B.C., Oba Ozolua, the preceding king died and left the throne for two powerful sons who were Esigie and Arhuan to dispute succession. (p. 23)

This excerpt presents the historicity of the Queen Idia of Benin whose image has been misinterpreted to mean *juju*. The term *juju* is a derogatory word used by 'some arm chair researchers' studying the African Traditional religion. Awolalu (1976:1) succinctly puts it that: Juju:

The word *juju* is French in origin and it means a little doll or toy. Its application to African deities has been perpetuated by English writers. For example, P. A. Talbot in his *Life in Southern Nigeria* devoted three chapters to Juju among the Ibibio people and discussed the various divinities among them. How can divinities, however minor, be described as toys? Africans are not so low in intelligence as to be incapable of distinguishing between an emblem or symbol of worship and a doll or toy. Juju is, therefore, one of the misleading and derogatory terms used by investigators out of either sheer prejudice or ignorance.

### Ancestral effigy staffs (Ukhure)

The *Ukhure* of Benin is an ancestral effigy staff (see Figure 2). Beliefs are encapsulated in the symbolism of the effigy rattle



Source: Esan History Since 850BC, 2022, *The Ukhure ancestral staff in Esan*, viewed n.d., from [https://www.facebook.com/PagesOfEsan/posts/493789015884671/?\\_rd\\_r](https://www.facebook.com/PagesOfEsan/posts/493789015884671/?_rd_r)

Note: Photo from Esan History since 850 BC's post in mobile uploads on Facebook.

FIGURE 2: Ancestral Effigy staffs (Ukhure).

staffs (*ukhure*) which the Benin people create and use to establish altars for the veneration of the spirits of their ancestors. Additionally, *ukhure* staffs indicate lineage history and are the quintessential symbols of the idea of family and lineage which form the foundation of the social order in Benin traditional society. They help to validate and venerate the position of the oldest surviving male (*okaegbee*) as the head of the extended family system. There are reports that the *okaegbee* is the custodian and priest of the family ancestral altar (*aro-erha*), performs the propitiatory rites to secure ancestral aid and protection and purification rites when family taboos are contravened. As Sweet (2013) rightly puts it, the *okaegbee* is 'the arrowhead in the family sponsorship of the superiority of the family over the individual' who is charged with the maintenance of peace and harmony within the family circle. The *ukhure* staffs are wooden elongated and segmented pole-like objects with hollow chambers which encase pieces of wood that create rattling sounds when shaken. Both the staffs and the altars are transformed into spiritual icons through a ritual called *ukomwen* (meaning 'to plant' or 'establish') which involves the offering of sacrifices of animal blood, drinks and food items (Sweet 2013). Thus, *Ukhure* can be abused if it enters the hand of a person who does not know its significance.

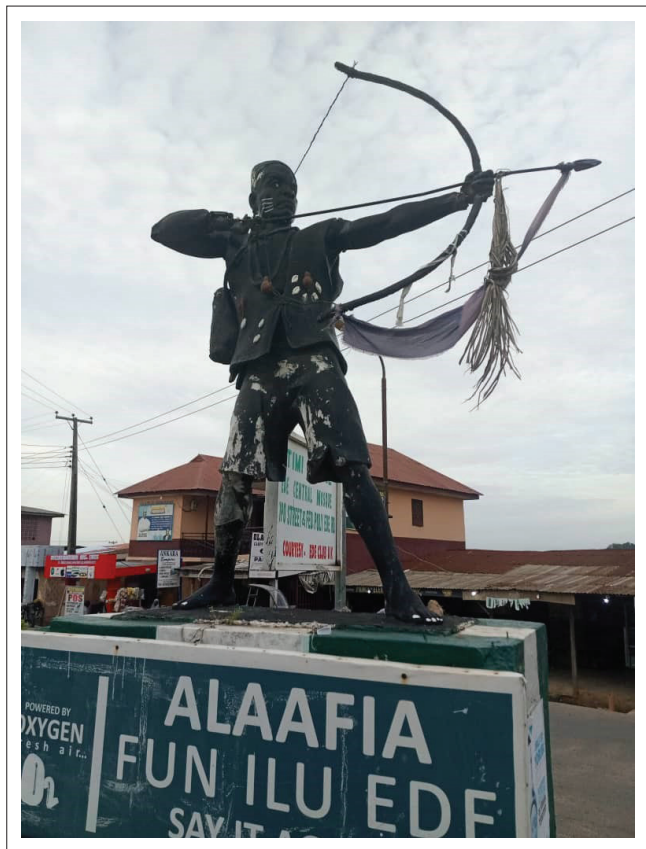
### The icon of the Timi Agbale Olofana of Ede<sup>1</sup>

Figure 3 is a description of the founder of the Ede community located in Osun State, Nigeria. The icon depicts a narrative of the lived reality of the people in relation to indigenous materiality. This icon which is Timi Agbale Olofana (i.e. Timi Agbale who used fiery arrows at war), a hunter, and warlord also known as Timi Agbale Olofana was the founder of Ede Ile (FGD 2021). It is believed by the Ede people that he is still present with them. This aligns with the view of Lawal (2011) who submits that *Ogun*, one of the Orisa (spirits that play key roles in the Yoruba Religion of West Africa), is known for tools, weapons and warfare, and often exemplified by a lance-holding or an equestrian warrior figure aimed at obliging a male ancestor to play the role of a protector. To the Ede people, the warrior Timi Agbale with fiery arrows alongside Sango-Timi, and other icons, still exists with prominence and thus assures the community of prominence and power in the face of adversity.

### Comparing the lived realities of the Old Testament and traditional Nigeria

In the course of the study, the lived realities of ancient Israelites as well as those of traditional Nigerians have been discussed. A few of these icons from the Old Testament and the Nigerian contexts are compared. For instance, among ancient Israel of the Old Testament, the Brazen Serpent of Numbers 21; the Ark of the Covenant of Exodus 25; the River Jordan memorial stones of Joshua 3 and 4 as well as the icon of Queen Idia the mother of Oba Esigie; the warrior Figure 3

1. This section is extracted from a paper presented at the Sixth J.A. Atanda Lectures and Conference organised by Professor Toyin Falola and his team, held on 21–23 June 2021 on the Theme: Yoruba Culture and Society at Babcock University, Ilishan-Remo, Ogun State.



Source: Photograph taken by the first author, Dr. Ucheawaji G. Josiah

Note: Picture taken at the palace junction of the current Timi of Ede, 2021.

**FIGURE 3:** Picture of the icon Timi Agbale Olofana.

of Timi Agbale with fiery arrows alongside Sango-Timi of Ede are symbols of divine presence and victories over life's obstacles, though in different contexts of realities.

The rod of Aaron that budded and the rods of the tribal heads in Numbers 17 represented authority whether divine or human. In the case of the Nigerian context, the ancestral effigy staff (Ukhure) among the Edo people and other tribes in Nigeria, signifies authority. Clearly put, the words in Joshua 4:6–7 remain very crucial as it reads:

Let this be a sign among you, so that when your children ask later, saying, 'What do these stones mean to you?' then you shall say to them, 'Because the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD; when it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off'. So these stones shall become a memorial to the sons of Israel forever.

The foregoing remains evident to the fact that certain lived-experiences in the Old Testament and Africa, especially, the Nigerian context shaped the people's understanding of their cultural materiality which served as memorials to their past experiences. This obvious fact appeared to have been suppressed by Western missionaries in their attempt to transmit the biblical truth and at the same time condemning cultural materiality of the indigenous people of Nigeria.

## Christian Missions' propaganda and the challenge of biblical reception in parts of Nigeria

The dawn of Christian Missions especially to the Yoruba land in the 1800s, ushered in a redefinition of indigenous sculptures. Such reinterpretation possibly emanates from the manner in which the Christian Missionaries (CM) viewed the African indigenous religious life. For example, Thomas Wilcoxon (1862:1) in his personal diary about the religious life of the Abeokuta people avers: 'You never hear a heathen defend his idols in Abeokuta ... The best thing he can say to justify his idolatry is "My father did the same ..."' Wilcoxon, and perhaps his colleagues, never understood the import of African sculptures and to them the materiality of those objects was neglected and viewed as 'idols'. The missionaries could not understand the statement of the *Massai Society* of Kenya whose words read: '... if we destroy our own culture and ways of life to construct a new one, it will initially take a thousand years' (Gatkuoth 2021). The implication of this statement is that cultural heritages have lasting memories engrained in the minds of the locals. The same concept is evident among the Edo (Ishan) tribe of Nigeria known as the concept of *ebalualu*, and which transcends a peripheral and literal meaning of the phrase 'My father did the same'. What this means is that their way of life was inherited and thus becomes part and parcel of their existence. The approach used by the missionaries in the transmission of biblical truth was with the intention of being seen as 'the conqueror' rather than a messenger.

The Missionary Society's ambition among other things was revealed by Tjoa-Bonatz (2009:118) when he noted that the society's intention was to display its victories over 'heathendom' as well as 'curiosities' on interesting objects such as 'idol images' from the 'pagan' world which were seen as 'defeated enemies'. The ambition was to display 'a frankly imperial endeavour, complete with military rhetoric of evangelical conquest'. No wonder while writing on the misconceptions about the indigenous worship and material culture of the Yoruba, Kolapo records that the indigenous religion and material culture of the Yoruba in comparison to Christianity have been perceived as 'incapacitated, identified with "ignorance" and "degradation" with "abominable practice of idolatry and superstition" with the worship of supposed spirits represented by "indescribable shapeless pieces of blocks, and of wood..."' (Kolapo 2019:90).

The conversion of the Nias population to Christianity as Tjoa-Bonatz (2009) observed, led to a reinterpretation of indigenous worship practices and cultural norms of the Nias population by the Western missionaries. In their misinterpretation and propaganda, indigenous figures identified as 'idolatrous' were destroyed and violated as a means to exterminate spirit worship and ridicule their beliefs in ancestors while other images were stripped of their religious significance. The height of the propaganda was the fact that those 'idolatrous' items from Africa sooner or later, became 'works of art worthy of safeguarding as collectors'

items, and cult images placed in museums which became new “sanctuaries” (Said 1995:166) as soon as they crossed the Atlantic Ocean.

As discovered by Lawal (1985), the socio-biological importance of indigenous sculptures is represented in the prominence given to its head. This is importantly portrayed in the carved head describing the powers and abilities of the warrior, Queen Idia of Benin. In other words, the *orí* which is the head of the sculpture is ontologically viewed as the life-source and the regulator of one’s personality and destiny. This is a fundamental ingredient of indigenous understanding of cultural materiality which Western missionaries never understood and were not ready to understand but rather, willing to entrench an ideology, new and strange to the local recipients.

Addressing the derogatory words directed at indigenous images, Quarcoo and Kevin (1971), assert that:

[W]ords like fetish, juju and ‘idol’ are pejorative and cannot be applied to Yoruba imagery with any precision...we are told that the Yoruba *orisa* are personifications of attributes of God and it is not right to accuse them of idolatry. (p. 137)

The materiality of indigenous objects remains intelligible among the recipients of such objects and is made meaningful only by same recipients. This therefore questions the reliability of Western interpretation of African cultural materiality.

This misinterpretation of African cultural objects by Western missionaries has been transmitted to Africans through the process of conversion. The story of Prof Bertram B.B. Mapunda, of Tanzania, a Professor of Anthropology and History is a clear narrative of a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the inherent values and cultural significance of ‘traditional staff of office’. Prof Mapunda during his presentation at a conference held at the University of Dar es Salaam between 04 and 08 January 2023 shared his experience when he had an accident. According to him, walking was difficult as a result of the accident. At a point he had recovered and was able to walk a little, his maternal uncles chose to honour him with an elder statesman’s status in the family, and so he was sent a ‘traditional staff of office’ for effective functioning in the new status he just assumed. Very much elated with the staff given him, he saw the staff as providential mobility aid. The ‘traditional staff of office’ was turned into a walking stick. One day, an elderly uncle of his saw him walking with the staff, and expressed his displeasure and disappointment for misplacement of the staff’s function. The elderly uncle according to him, explained that the staff was a symbol of leadership, authority and power. The staff was only to be brought out and handled by the eldest man in the family (a status he had assumed) and on occasions when important decisions are to be taken in the family. On no account was it to be used outside the stipulated roles. Prof Mapunda claimed that he lacked this understanding at first and thereby abused and misused the ‘traditional staff of office’. The

implication of the above is that to a large extent, Africans have gradually lost the cultural sense of certain material culture, and thus need a reorientation as to the centrality of the symbolic emblem to their existence, within their cultural community.

Similar to Prof Mapunda’s experience, there was an accident that happened where a young man, an undergraduate student of a certain university in the southwest Nigeria, who for lack of money, sold his family royal crown and staff to his cousin, a history department student of the same institution who later donated the materials to the department’s historical centre without knowing the significance of the crown and staff. Unfortunately, when he realised the importance of the materials, he sought for ways to recover the traditional items. When asked about the reason for selling the staff and crown to his cousin, the young man responded as follows:

‘The staff is a walking stick known to the Igbos as *Mpkara*. The walking stick dates back to ancient times. *Mpkara* was first used as a weapon. The walking stick has long been a symbol of strength and power, authority and social prestige, predominantly among men. His great grandfather was the first to carry the *mpkara* given to him by the first white slave trader in the then Owerri Amaukwu kingdom. Next to inherit the staff was his grandfather. Then a grandson became the ruler of the kingdom. The *Mpkara* became a symbol of authority as it has passed through generations of patriarchs in our lineage. It was under the leadership of his grand-father that special rules of etiquette governing the use of the walking stick was developed, including who, where, when, and how to carry it. At his death in 2007, his first son, a Rt. Captain inherited the items, but as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian who refused to exercise the kingship. But even as such, the *Mpkara* was given to him because the *Mpkara* is a symbol of passage and lineage, not necessarily of kingship. The *Mkpara* was kept in a hidden place to be passed down to my elder brother, but was given to me to display during a cultural day at my university during my undergraduate studies. Not knowing the significance of it, I sold it to a cousin of mine, a student in the department of history and international studies, who was asked to get an artefact for the historical centre of their department. Now the *Mpkara* is needed, and I have been asked to bring it back but do not know how to go about it.’ (Anonymous interview, pers. comm., 03 March 2023)

The preceding story is a true representation of what most African icons and materiality have gone through and are currently going through. Indigenous religious items with historical values have become objects of fun and beauty in museums without their true significance being known to the ‘abductors’. The influence of Christianity and globalisation has led to the conflict in ideology, misinterpretation and misapplication of traditional and cultural materials of historical values.

## Conclusion

The material culture as evident in the OT was borne out of personal and corporate experiences of ancient Israelites. These experiences became ontological in shaping who they were. The objects preserved by Israel of old were to serve as

relics for future generations who would have a taste of the experience when told the stories underpinning the objects. The Western missionaries claimed to have brought the gospel to Africa. But their inability to transmit the biblical understanding of cultural materiality into their dealings with Africans who by nature, have similar identity, invites suspicion and thus regards the missionaries' efforts as propaganda if they well-understood the history significance of the OT cultural objects and yet pretended to be ignorant of the ontological significance of African indigenous materiality. The approach employed by the Western missionaries to evangelise Africans led to conflicts in relation to biblical reception by the indigenous people who struggle between being detached from their ontological and existential realities, and accepting the gospel with its Eurocentric biases. Therefore, biblicists and other religious scholars should seek ways of balancing a biblical understanding of the existential realities of ancient Israel and those of Africa as it relates to cultural materiality and biblical reception.

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## Authors' contributions

U.G.J. contributed substantially to the conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, writing part of the original draft, review and editing while B.J.E. contributed to the investigation and writing of part of the original draft.

## Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was not sought for in this research because of the exemption clause by the National Health Research Ethics Committee of Nigeria (NHREC) which suffices for this kind of research. The NHREC of Nigeria (2007) stipulates in Section B of the NHREC document that research involving the use of survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behaviour with the anonymity of the human participants maintained is exempted from ethical approval.

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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